Liberalism, perfectionism and restraint

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Introduction

Perfectionist conceptions of political morality have made something of a comeback in recent years. Long understood as opposed to liberalism, perfectionism has been depicted as hostile to personal autonomy and antithetical to pluralism. Lately, this depiction has been called into question. A number of political philosophers have attempted to defend a conception of perfectionism that is compatible with liberalism.[1] This book addresses the debate between these liberal perfectionists and their critics. It investigates whether the resurgence of perfectionism is well founded; and, if so, how congruent it is with liberal principles and ideals.

The issues

The main issue between perfectionism and anti-perfectionism centers on which one gives a better account of political morality. But what makes one account better than another?

Two answers suggest themselves. The first one concerns how well an account of political morality explains its subject matter; that is, how well it helps us understand political morality and how well it justifies substantive judgments supported by political morality. We can refer to this as the *justificatory force* of the account.[2] The second one concerns the substantive judgments about important political issues that the account yields or supports. We can refer to this as the *critical potential* of the account.

It would be, of course, a mistake to think that the justificatory force

[1] See J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, T. Hurka, *Perfectionism* and V. Haksar, *Equality, Liberty and Perfectionism*.

[2] It might be thought that we can distinguish the explanatory power of an account of political morality (how well it explains its subject matter) from its ability to justify substantive judgments, and that I have collapsed the two with the broad phrase "justificatory force." But I believe that even if this distinction can be drawn, the two go together. The more we understand political morality, the better we will be at justifying substantive moral judgments in politics. If this is right, no confusion should result from using "justificatory force" as I define it.

and the critical potential of an account of political morality have nothing to do with each other. One reason for thinking that an account has justificatory force is that it yields or supports intuitively correct substantive judgments about important political issues. But while justificatory force and critical potential are clearly related, they remain distinct. This can be grasped by reflecting on the possibility that two accounts of political morality could support exactly the same substantive judgments about a wide range of political issues and yet differ dramatically in justificatory force. One account could do a much better job than the other in explaining and justifying the substantive judgments that both accounts support.

Much of this book is concerned with arguing that perfectionism provides a better understanding of political morality than anti-perfectionism. Liberal perfectionism, I will argue, has greater justificatory force than anti-perfectionist liberalism.[3] This conclusion is not threatened by the possibility that the best account of perfectionist political morality and the best account of anti-perfectionist political morality yield the same substantive political judgments. Such a happy convergence in critical potential would not show that both accounts were equally good.

This is worth bearing in mind, since perfectionists are sometimes taken to task for not being more specific about how their theories differ from anti-perfectionist theories with regard to concrete particulars.[4] The thought behind this complaint seems to be that until perfectionists can show that anti-perfectionist theories yield incorrect substantive judgments about concrete political issues their theories do not warrant serious consideration. Distinguishing the justificatory force from the critical potential of an account of political morality helps us see that this complaint is misguided.

Notwithstanding this point, in the concluding chapter of this book, I will discuss a range of public policy issues and I will show that (with regard to some of them) liberal perfectionism and anti-perfectionist liberalism point toward different political judgments. I will further argue that the judgments reached by liberal perfectionism are superior. This is intended to impart supplementary support for the claim that liberal perfectionism provides a better account of political morality than its anti-perfectionist rival.

A large part of my brief for perfectionism will consist in defending it

[3] By "liberal perfectionism" I mean a perfectionist account of political morality that holds that personal autonomy is a central component of human flourishing.

[4] See, for example, Rawls' general response to critics of political liberalism. "Reply to Habermas," p. 150.

from two general types of criticism. These two types of criticism are seldom distinguished, but it facilitates critical examination of them if they are kept apart. The two criticisms point toward two different levels at which perfectionism might be challenged. The first level is theoretical, the second practical.

Let me explain. It is sometimes argued that in formulating ultimate standards for judging political institutions and public policies we should not appeal to any controversial conception of the good. According to this view, we will get a better account of political morality if, when we formulate it, we bracket our understandings of what comprises a fully good life. So understood, this view is clearly incompatible with perfectionism. If it is sound, perfectionism must be rejected.

But the converse is not true. Rejection of this view does not thereby commit one to perfectionism. It is possible to believe that in formulating an account of political morality we should draw freely on our best understanding of what comprises a fully good life and yet reject perfectionism. This is possible, since an account of political morality so formulated might yield the judgment that when it comes to public policy the state should not intentionally favor any ideals of the good over others.[5] In other words, this account might come to the conclusion that the best way for the state to promote the good is for it to refrain from using its power to promote the good.

An adequate defense of perfectionism, therefore, must not only show that we ought to draw on our best understandings of the good life when formulating an account of political morality, but also show that when we do this we do not arrive at an account that rejects perfectionism out of hand at the practical level of public policy. I shall undertake just such a defense in this book.

A restriction in scope

Before outlining my argument, I would like to make it plain that I will be concerned with the political morality of *modern western societies*. I will not claim (or deny) that this political morality is binding on all people in all places. There are several reasons for restricting the scope of the argument in this way, but three in particular should be mentioned here.

First, the version of anti-perfectionist political morality that I shall be criticizing explicitly makes this same restriction. There is, moreover,

[5] To invoke Rawls' terminology, it is possible for an account of political morality to be both comprehensive and anti-perfectionist – a point noted by S. Mulhall and A. Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, p. 251.

good reason for it to make it. As we shall see shortly, this version of anti-perfectionist political morality relies heavily on the contractualist norm of reasonable rejectability. For this norm to yield determinate results, the range of people to whom it applies must be limited.[6] Given this, it makes perfect sense for proponents of this view to insist that their account of political morality applies only to modern western societies.

Second, the question whether moral norms in general and norms of political morality in particular are universally binding across all cultures raises large and difficult issues that I cannot address. In saying this I should not be understood to be endorsing any version of relativism. In this book, as much as it is possible, I simply want to leave this question open.

Third, in chapter 7, I will advance one argument about the value of personal autonomy that refers to the social forms that predominate in modern western societies. This argument presumes that the general character of these social forms is worthy of support, but I do not try to establish that these social forms are superior to all other social forms that either exist in other places or have existed in the past.

For these reasons, then, this book is concerned only with the political morality appropriate for modern western societies. Given this restriction, it may be helpful if I outline at the outset some of the distinguishing features of these societies. Six in particular can be singled out:

(1) geographic mobility
(2) technological and economic innovation
(3) familial and social mobility
(4) secularization
(5) pluralism
(6) a commitment to human rights

These six features are important constitutive elements of the social forms of modern western societies. Later I will discuss each one of them in more detail. For now it should suffice to point out that these features distinguish modern western societies from centralized tyrannies like the former Soviet Union, theocentric societies like some now found in the Islamic world, pre-industrial societies, and those societies which may have modern economies, but which suppress pluralism and do not respect human rights.[7]

[6] As B. Williams has pointed out, this is true because the norm crucially relies on shared beliefs and intuitions for its application. See *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 103.

[7] Not all societies that might plausibly be classified as modern western will exhibit each of these six features or have them to the same degree. But in assessing the argument of this book it may help to have in mind a paradigm case in which all six features are clearly present.

Outline of the argument

Now to the outline. The argument of this book unfolds in nine chapters. In the first chapter I present a general account of perfectionism. The purpose of doing so is, first, to make it more clear how the term will be used throughout this book and, second, to correct some common misperceptions.

After this introductory chapter, the book divides into two main parts. In Part II discuss and criticize (what I consider to be) the most important and the best-developed account of anti-perfectionist political morality. This is an account that receives its most rigorous expression in the recent work of John Rawls. Much of my discussion in Part I, accordingly, focuses on his work. However, I also consider a number of arguments advanced by others who share his general outlook.

Part I itself divides into four chapters. In chapter 2 I discuss the idea of restraint, an idea that lies at the heart of this account of anti-perfectionist political morality. Chapter 3 identifies and critically examines two prefatory arguments in favor of restraint. I term these the *pragmatic argument* and the *argument from political justification*. Picking up where this leaves off, chapter 4 discusses in detail Rawls' "democratic idea of toleration." I argue that this is a flawed account of toleration. Therefore, I conclude, it cannot be relied on to justify anti-perfectionism. Finally, in chapter 5, I analyze the idea of public justification and ask whether it provides any support for the idea of restraint.

The conclusion of Part I is that this version of anti-perfectionist political morality is unconvincing. I reach this conclusion not by showing that the account does not fit our considered judgments about important political issues, but by arguing that its central idea – the idea of restraint – is not rationally grounded.

Part II is the constructive part of the book. It seeks to show that perfectionism and liberalism are compatible; and that the best perfectionist theory is a liberal one. In chapters 6–8 I present an account of the nature and status of personal autonomy. This account provides answers to four questions: (1) What are the constituent elements of this ideal?, (2) What considerations account for its value?, (3) What standing does personal autonomy have in a sound account of political morality? and (4) What constraints does a proper respect for this ideal place on perfectionist political action?

My main conclusions are that personal autonomy is an ideal of special importance for people in modern western societies; that it, accordingly, warrants a privileged position in an account of political morality appropriate for these societies; and that, therefore, political authorities in these

societies have duties to create and maintain social conditions that best enable their subjects to lead autonomous lives. I also conclude that a strong commitment to personal autonomy does not render impermissible (at least at the level of principle) perfectionist political action designed to favor valuable lifestyles, pursuits, options, etc. over base ones.[8]

The concluding chapter – chapter nine – brings the discussion down to earth by considering a range of public policy issues. Its goal is to give some indication of how the perfectionist views defended in this book might differ from anti-perfectionist views at the level of concrete politics.[9]

[8] As I will explain more fully in chapter 8 below, we can distinguish between two types of perfectionist political action. One type – call it Type (1) – covers political action intended to favor or promote personal autonomy. A second type – call it Type (2) – covers political action intended to favor valuable options over base ones. In chapters 6–8 I argue that a proper understanding of personal autonomy mandates Type (1) perfectionism and is compatible with at least some political measures that fall under Type (2) perfectionism.

[9] Although the parts of this book contribute to a single argument, they are to some extent separable. A reader could accept the critique of the bracketing strategy in Part I, but reject the account of personal autonomy in Part II. Likewise, a reader could accept the main arguments in Part I and Part II, but reject some of the policy judgments defended in chapter 9.